

# Research Progress on the Treatment of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome with Traditional Chinese Medicine

Yingfang Fan<sup>1</sup>, Xin Yang<sup>1</sup>, Ziyi Yang<sup>1</sup>, Xiaohui Qu<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine, Xianyang 712000, Shaanxi, China

<sup>2</sup>The Second Affiliated Hospital of Shaanxi University of Chinese Medicine, Xianyang 712000, Shaanxi, China

*\*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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**Abstract:** Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a common gynecological endocrine disorder that seriously affects women's reproductive health and quality of life. PCOS, a common and frequently occurring reproductive endocrine disorder among women of puberty and childbearing age, with its complex pathological mechanisms and diverse clinical manifestations, has become a hot and difficult topic in gynecological medical research both at home and abroad. Although there is no modern name "polycystic ovary syndrome" in traditional Chinese medicine, based on its clinical manifestations, it can be classified into the categories of "menstrual disorders", "infertility", "masses", etc., for syndrome differentiation and treatment. In recent years, traditional Chinese medicine has played an important role in the clinical treatment of PCOS. This article reviews the understanding of the etiology and pathogenesis, diagnostic methods, therapeutic approaches, and clinical research progress of PCOS through traditional Chinese medicine, aiming to provide a reference for the clinical treatment of PCOS.

**Keywords:** Polycystic ovary syndrome; Etiology and pathogenesis; Diagnosis; Treatment; Research progress

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## 1. Introduction

Polycystic ovary syndrome is a common gynecological endocrine disorder characterized by clinical or biochemical manifestations of hyperandrogenism, persistent anovulation, and polycystic changes in the ovaries <sup>[1]</sup>. PCOS not only causes menstrual disorders, infertility, hirsutism, obesity, and other symptoms, but also increases the risk of long-term complications such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. At present, Western medicine mainly treats PCOS by regulating endocrine, inducing ovulation, improving insulin resistance, or addressing specific symptoms and targeting certain pathophysiological links, which have obvious effects but have certain side effects and limitations. Traditional Chinese medicine has

unique advantages in the treatment of PCOS. Through syndrome differentiation and treatment, and the comprehensive application of various therapeutic methods such as Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and massage, it can effectively improve the symptoms of patients and enhance clinical efficacy.

## **2. Understanding of the etiology and pathogenesis of PCOS in traditional Chinese medicine**

### **2.1. Etiology**

#### **2.1.1. Insufficiency of innate endowment**

Congenital insufficiency is one of the important causes of gynecological diseases. In *Miraculous Pivot: Five Tones and Five Tastes*, it is written: “The birth of a woman has more than Qi and less than blood, and thus loses blood”. This indicates that women are born with a weaker constitution and are prone to insufficiency of Qi and blood. The kidneys are the foundation of the innate constitution and govern reproduction <sup>[2]</sup>. Insufficiency of innate endowment, weakness of kidney Qi, deficiency of heavenly essence, and imbalance of Chong and Ren meridians can lead to menstrual disorders, infertility, and other conditions similar to the clinical manifestations of polycystic ovary syndrome.

#### **2.1.2. Dysregulation of emotions**

Emotional imbalance is also one of the important factors causing gynecological diseases. “All diseases arise from Qi. Anger causes Qi to rise, joy causes Qi to slow down, sorrow causes Qi to dissipate, fear causes Qi to descend, cold causes Qi to gather, heat causes Qi to release, shock causes Qi to disorder, toil causes Qi to deplete, thought causes Qi to block” <sup>[3]</sup>. This indicates that emotional imbalance affects the movement of Qi in the body, leading to disharmony of Qi and blood and imbalance of the chong and Ren meridians. The liver governs the smooth flow of Qi. Long-term mental stress, anxiety, depression, and other emotional disorders can lead to liver Qi stagnation, abnormal flow of Qi, disharmony of Qi and blood, and imbalance of chong and Ren meridians, thereby causing symptoms similar to polycystic ovary syndrome.

#### **2.1.3. Improper diet**

Unhealthy dietary habits constitute another major pathogenic factor triggering female genital ailments. As documented in *Plain Questions · Treatise on Bi Syndrome*, overindulgence in food intake will injure gastrointestinal functions. Unregulated eating habits impair the spleen-stomach system and weaken the body’s digestion and nutrient absorption capacity. Heavy intake of greasy, sweet, spicy, or irritant food hurts spleen and stomach functions, disturbs spleen transportation, and causes lingering phlegm-damp retention inside the body. Such pathological damp-phlegm blocks the thoroughfare and conception vessels, eventually resulting in irregular menstruation, amenorrhea, barrenness, and multiple symptoms matching polycystic ovary syndrome.

#### **2.1.4. Improper work-rest arrangement**

Either physical overstrain or prolonged sedentary inactivity easily induces gynecologic disorders. The classical record from *Plain Questions · Five Energies Thesis* states: long-time eye strain damages blood; excessive bed rest consumes primordial Qi; prolonged sitting harms muscle tissue; prolonged standing impairs osseous tissue; excessive walking injures tendons.

This ancient viewpoint proves that irregular rest and labor break normal blood-Qi circulation inside the human body, contributing to disharmonized Qi-blood and dysfunction of Chong-Ren vessels. Both overexertion and excessive idling impair spleen and kidney essence, trigger deficient Qi and blood as well as deranged Chong-Ren meridians, which further induce pathological manifestations.

## **2.2. Pathogenesis**

### **2.2.1. Kidney deficiency is the root cause**

The kidneys store essence and govern reproduction. Kidney deficiency is the fundamental pathogenesis of PCOS. Deficiency of kidney Qi, insufficiency of heavenly essence, and deficiency of Chong and Ren meridians can lead to irregular menstruation and infertility. Weakness of kidney Yang, unable to warm the spleen Yang, can lead to deficiency of spleen and kidney Yang, retention of water and dampness, and aggravation of phlegm-dampness obstruction. Deficiency of kidney Yin, unable to nourish liver wood, can lead to liver and kidney Yin deficiency and internal generation of false fire <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.2.2. Liver depression and Qi stagnation**

The liver governs the smooth flow of Qi throughout the body. When the liver Qi is depressed and the free flow is abnormal, it can lead to poor circulation of Qi and blood and an imbalance of the chong and Ren meridians. When liver depression affects the spleen, it can lead to spleen deficiency and internal generation of phlegm and dampness. When liver depression turns into fire, it can cause internal disturbance of heat and force blood to flow wrongly.

### **2.2.3. Phlegm-dampness obstruction**

The spleen governs the transformation and transportation of water and dampness. If the spleen fails to function properly, water and dampness will accumulate and generate phlegm. Phlegm-dampness blocking the Chong and Ren meridians can lead to irregular menstruation, amenorrhea, and infertility. Internal accumulation of phlegm and dampness can also affect the circulation of Qi and blood and aggravate the condition.

### **2.2.4. Internal obstruction of blood stasis**

Prolonged illness can invade the meridians and cause poor circulation of Qi and blood, leading to internal obstruction of blood stasis. Blood stasis blocking the Chong and Ren meridians can lead to irregular menstruation, dysmenorrhea, amenorrhea, etc. Blood stasis and phlegm-dampness bind together, making the condition more complicated to treat.

## **3. Diagnostic methods for PCOS in traditional Chinese medicine**

### **3.1. Four diagnostic methods combined**

The diagnosis of polycystic ovary syndrome in traditional Chinese medicine primarily relies on the combined approach of observation, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, and palpation. Observation, by observing the patient's complexion, shape, tongue coating, etc., to determine the abundance or deficiency of Qi and blood and the function of the internal organs; Auscultation involves listening to the patient's voice and smell to understand the changes in the condition; Inquiry, asking about the patient's medical history, symptoms, living

habits, etc., to obtain comprehensive information; Palpation involves pressing the patient's pulse with a finger to feel the rise, fall, delay and count of the pulse to determine whether the illness is cold, heat, deficiency or excess <sup>[5]</sup>. In the diagnosis of diseases, traditional Chinese medicine pays particular attention to observing the patient's menstrual conditions, such as the cycle, changes in volume, color, and texture, and whether there are symptoms such as dysmenorrhea and amenorrhea. At the same time, it also pays attention to changes in the patient's body shape, such as obesity, excessive hair, and external manifestations like acne on the face, which are important bases for TCM to judge whether the circulation of Qi and blood and the functions of the internal organs are out of balance.

## **3.2. Syndrome differentiation and typing**

### **3.2.1. Liver Qi stagnation type**

#### **(1) Clinical manifestations**

PCOS sufferers belonging to the liver Qi stagnation pattern frequently suffer from depressive mood, nervousness, and vexation, accompanied by distending pain over the chest and hypochondrium, as well as mammary distending discomfort. Their menstrual cycle tends to be chaotic, featuring hypomenorrhea or even secondary amenorrhea; facial acne also emerges recurrently. Tongue manifestation includes a pale-red tongue body with thin white fur, alongside a string-like or string-thready pulse.

#### **(2) Therapeutic approaches**

Dredge stagnated liver Qi to ease emotional constraint and modulate visceral Qi activity. From the TCM theoretical perspective, the liver is in charge of smooth Qi dispersion. Once liver Qi falls into stagnation, visceral Qi movement becomes obstructed, which hampers blood circulation and compromises the physiological functions of Chong and Ren vessels. Hence, clinical management centers on liver-soothing and depression-relief, paired with Qi-blood regulation to bring menstrual rhythm back to normal.

#### **(3) Common herbal selections**

Prescriptions for this syndrome regularly deploy bupleurum root, white peony root, cyperus rotundus rhizome, and similar medicinal herbs for resolving liver stagnation. Clinicians usually add blood-circulating and stasis-eliminating botanicals, including Chinese angelica and Sichuan lovage rhizome, to optimize systemic blood perfusion.

### **3.2.2. Spleen deficiency with dampness obstruction type**

#### **(1) Clinical manifestations**

Patients diagnosed with PCOS of spleen deficiency and dampness stagnation pattern generally exhibit typical constitutional symptoms, including an overweight tendency, persistent lassitude, poor digestive capacity despite normal appetite, and unformed stool. Menstrual disturbance is commonly observed, characterized by delayed menstrual cycle, reduced menstrual volume, pale menstrual blood color, and thin blood texture. Typical tongue and pulse conditions consist of a pale and enlarged tongue with dental indentations, white and slippery tongue coating, as well as a slippery and thready pulse.

#### **(2) Therapeutic principle**

Tonify the spleen to eliminate internal dampness, and harmonize Qi and blood conditions within the body. In traditional Chinese medicine theory, the spleen undertakes the core function of transporting and transforming water-damp substances throughout the body. Insufficient spleen Qi inevitably leads to

dysfunction of water-damp metabolism, further causing endogenous phlegm-damp accumulation and visceral obstruction. Accordingly, clinical treatment prioritizes invigorating spleen function and dispelling dampness turbidity. Auxiliary regulation of Qi and blood circulation is essential to restore a regular menstrual rhythm<sup>[5]</sup>.

### (3) Common medicinal applications

Herbal medicines capable of replenishing spleen Qi, drying dampness, and dissolving phlegm are predominantly adopted for this syndrome, such as *Astragalus membranaceus*, *Codonopsis pilosula*, and *Poria cocos*. To further ameliorate systemic microcirculation and unblock stagnated circulation, blood-nourishing and circulation-promoting herbs, including *Angelica sinensis* and *Ligusticum chuanxiong*, are often supplemented in compound prescriptions.

## 3.2.3. Kidney Yang deficiency type

### (1) Symptoms

Patients with kidney Yang deficiency type often show symptoms such as pale complexion, soreness and weakness of the waist and knees, aversion to cold and cold limbs, and irregular menstruation. Menstruation is often scanty and pale in color in the later stage, and amenorrhea may occur. A pale tongue with a white coating and a fine, weak pulse can be seen on the tongue.

### (2) Treatment principles

Warming Yang and tonifying the kidney, regulating the meridians. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the kidney is the foundation of the innate constitution. Deficiency of kidney Yang leads to dysfunction of the Chong and Ren meridians, which affects the normal onset of menstruation. Treatment should focus on warming Yang and tonifying the kidney, while also regulating the meridians to ensure the normal flow of Qi and blood.

### (3) Common medications

Medicines such as *Rehmannia glutinosa*, *Cinnamomum cassia*, and *Curculigo orchoides*, which have the effects of tonifying the kidney and strengthening Yang and warming and tonifying the meridians, are often used in the treatment of such patients<sup>[6]</sup>. At the same time, it can be combined with blood-activating drugs such as *Angelica sinensis* and *Ligusticum chuanxiong* to improve blood circulation.

## 3.2.4. Kidney Yin deficiency type

### (1) Symptoms

Patients with kidney Yin deficiency type often present with delayed menarche, scanty and pale menstrual flow in the later stage, and eventually amenorrhea. It may also be accompanied by symptoms such as a small body shape and acne on the forehead. The tongue shows a red tongue with little coating and a fine, rapid pulse.

### (2) Treatment principles

Nourish the kidney and replenish essence, regulate menstruation, and assist conception. According to traditional Chinese medicine, a deficiency of kidney Yin leads to insufficiency of heavenly essence and malnutrition of the Chong and Ren meridians, resulting in irregular menstruation. Treatment should focus on nourishing the kidneys and replenishing essence, while also regulating the functions of the Chong and Ren meridians to promote normal menstruation and conception.

### (3) Common drugs

*Rehmannia glutinosa*, *Cornus officinalis*, yams, and other drugs with the function of nourishing kidney

Yin in the modified formula of Zuogui Pills are often used for the treatment of such patients. At the same time, it can be combined with blood-activating drugs such as *Angelica sinensis* and *Ligusticum chuanxiong* to improve blood circulation.

## **4. Traditional Chinese medicine treatment methods for PCOS**

### **4.1. A single Chinese herb**

#### **4.1.1. Epimedium**

Epimedium has the effects of tonifying the kidney and strengthening Yang, dispelling wind and dampness. Modern research shows that epimedium can increase the ovaries' sensitivity to gonadotropins and promote follicular development and ovulation; It can also lower androgen levels and raise estrogen levels <sup>[7]</sup>.

#### **4.1.2. Danshen**

*Salvia miltiorrhiza* has the effects of promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis, regulating menstruation, and relieving pain. Modern research shows that *Salvia miltiorrhiza* can improve microcirculation and increase tissue sensitivity to insulin; It can also lower androgen levels and raise estrogen levels <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **4.1.3. Poria cocos**

*Poria cocos* has the effects of strengthening the spleen, promoting diuresis, calming the mind, and soothing the spirit. Modern research shows that poria can improve insulin resistance and lower blood sugar and insulin levels; It can also regulate the immune function and enhance the body's immunity.

## **4.2. Acupuncture treatment**

### **4.2.1. Body acupuncture therapy**

#### **(1) Selection principles**

According to the etiology, pathogenesis, and clinical manifestations of PCOS, select acupoints that have the functions of tonifying the kidney and strengthening the spleen, soothing the liver and regulating Qi, promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis, eliminating phlegm and promoting diuresis. Common acupoints include Guanyuan, Qihai, Zhongji, Gongzi, Guailai, Sanyinjiao, Xuehai, Zusanli, Taichong, etc <sup>[9]</sup>.

#### **(2) Procedure**

The patient is placed in a supine or prone position. After routine disinfection of the skin of the acupoint, a filiform needle is used to prick the acupoint. The needle is retained for 20 to 30 minutes after Qi is obtained. During this period, the needle can be inserted appropriately to enhance the sensation of the needle. Treatment 2–3 times a week, with 10 sessions as one course.

### **4.2.2. Auricular acupuncture therapy**

#### **(1) Selection principles**

Select auricular points related to the reproductive system, endocrine system, nervous system, etc. Common acupoints include the endocrine, ovary, Shenmen, liver, spleen, kidney, etc.

#### **(2) Method**

After disinfecting the skin of the auricle with an alcohol cotton ball, apply the seeds of *Plantago*

japonicus or magnetic beads to the auricular points, applying to one auricular point at a time, and changing every 3 to 5 days, alternating between the two ears. Instruct the patient to press the auricular points 3–5 times a day by themselves, for 1–2 minutes each time.

#### **4.2.3. Moxibustion therapy**

##### **(1) Selection principles**

Select acupoints that have the functions of warming Yang and tonifying the kidney, strengthening the spleen and promoting diuresis, and activating blood and removing blood stasis. Common acupoints include Guanyuan, Qihai, Shenzhu, Zhongji, Gongzi, Guailai, Sanyinjiao, Zusanli, etc.

##### **(2) Method**

Use moxa stick suspension moxibustion or moxa cone moxibustion on the acupoints for 15–20 minutes each time, 2–3 times a week, 10 times as one course of treatment.

#### **4.2.4. Combined therapy**

Depending on the patient's specific condition, body acupuncture, auricular acupuncture, moxibustion and other therapies can be combined and used in combination to improve the therapeutic effect.

### **4.3. Massage therapy**

#### **4.3.1. Abdominal massage**

The patient lies in a supine position. The physician massages the patient's abdomen clockwise with the palm for 10–15 minutes each time, 1–2 times a day. The doctor uses his fingers to press the Guanyuan, Qihai, Zhongji, uterus, and other acupoints on the patient's abdomen for 1 to 2 minutes each time, 1 to 2 times a day.

#### **4.3.2. Massage of the waist**

The patient is in a prone position. The physician massages the patient's waist clockwise with the palm for 10–15 minutes each time, 1–2 times a day. The doctor uses his fingers to press the acupoints on the patient's waist, such as Shenshu, Mingmen, and Yaoyangguan, for 1 to 2 minutes each time, 1 to 2 times a day.

#### **4.3.3. Massage of the limbs**

The patient is in a supine or sitting position. The physician uses fingers to press the Zusanli, Sanyinjiao, Xuehai, Hegu, and other acupoints on the patient's limbs for 1 to 2 minutes, 1 to 2 times a day. The doctor kneads the muscles of the patient's limbs with the palm for 10–15 minutes each time, 1–2 times a day.

## **5. Advances in clinical research on traditional Chinese medicine for PCOS**

### **5.1. Clinical efficacy**

A number of clinical studies have shown that traditional Chinese medicine has good clinical efficacy in treating PCOS. Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, and other treatments can effectively improve symptoms such as menstrual disorders, infertility, hirsutism, obesity, increase ovulation and pregnancy rates, and reduce androgen levels and insulin resistance index. In recent years, with the deepening of research on traditional Chinese medicine and the accumulation of clinical practice, significant progress has been made

in clinical research on the treatment of PCOS with traditional Chinese medicine. For example, research by Professor Tang Qiqun's team from Fudan University shows that artemisinin derivatives can improve PCOS symptoms by mediating LONP1-CYP11A1 interactions. This discovery not only reveals the potential value of artemisinin in the treatment of PCOS but also provides new ideas and methods for the modernization of traditional Chinese medicine research.

In addition, significant progress has been made in the acupuncture treatment of PCOS in traditional Chinese medicine. The "Study on the Efficacy and Safety of Acupuncture for Oligomenorrhea in Polycystic Ovary Syndrome: An International multicenter Randomized Controlled Pre-Trial" project, jointly conducted by the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences and the Korea Institute of Korean Medicine, further verified the efficacy and safety of acupuncture in the treatment of PCOS <sup>[10]</sup>. These findings not only provide strong evidence for the treatment of PCOS with traditional Chinese medicine but also offer valuable references and lessons for the international medical community.

## **5.2. Mechanism of action**

### **5.2.1. Regulating endocrine**

It can promote follicular development and ovulation by regulating the function of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis, reducing androgen levels, and increasing estrogen levels. For example, kidney-tonifying herbs can enhance the ovaries' sensitivity to gonadotropins and promote follicular development and ovulation; Chinese medicines that soothe the liver and regulate Qi can regulate the neuroendocrine system, improve mood, and relieve symptoms such as anxiety and depression.

### **5.2.2. Improve insulin resistance**

The risk of long-term complications such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases can be reduced by improving insulin resistance, lowering blood sugar, and insulin levels. For example, traditional Chinese medicine for strengthening the spleen and eliminating phlegm can improve insulin resistance and lower blood sugar and insulin levels; Chinese herbs can improve microcirculation and increase tissue sensitivity to insulin.

### **5.2.3. Regulating immune function**

Regulating the immune function can suppress the inflammatory response, reduce local immune damage to the ovaries, and promote the recovery of ovarian function. For example, traditional Chinese medicine for tonifying the kidney can regulate immune function and enhance the body's immunity; Heat-clearing and detoxifying herbs can suppress inflammatory responses and reduce local immune damage to the ovaries.

## **6. Conclusion**

To sum up, traditional Chinese medicine has unique advantages in the clinical treatment of PCOS. By understanding the etiology and pathogenesis of PCOS, using the method of syndrome differentiation and treatment, and integrating various therapeutic methods such as Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and massage, traditional Chinese medicine can effectively improve the symptoms of patients and enhance the clinical efficacy. At the same time, the treatment of PCOS with traditional Chinese medicine is highly safe and does not cause damage to the liver and kidney functions of patients. Therefore, traditional Chinese

medicine has broad application prospects in the clinical treatment of PCOS. However, there are still some deficiencies in the current research on PCOS in traditional Chinese medicine, such as the lack of large-sample, multi-center clinical studies and the insufficient in-depth study of the mechanism of action. In the future, we should further strengthen clinical research on PCOS in traditional Chinese medicine, explore its mechanism of action in depth, and provide more scientific and effective methods for the clinical treatment of PCOS.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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